



FOUNDATIONS

In each protected area, a coalition of stakeholders do extraordinary work behind the scenes and on the peripheries. To demonstrate the flow-down benefit of tourism, Sue Watt focuses on one of her favourite places: Hwange National Park

Hwange is special. Over many years, it has granted me unforgettable memories: those times when elephants silently approach waterholes, like ghosts in the dusky light as we sip our sundowners, or lion cubs I've watched finding their way in the wild and later seeing as dominant males. But the memories are as much about people as they are about pachyderms and predators: people who strive to protect this vast reserve and live alongside it with their challenging wildlife neighbours.

Most safari operators in Zimbabwe's largest national park contribute towards conservation and communities, establishing their own initiatives or supporting existing projects. On my first visit in 2012, I stayed at Somalisa Camp with lodge operator Beks Ndlovu, founder of African Bush Camps and its ABC Foundation (ABCF). Few tourists visited then, due to the political and economic climate at the time, yet Hwange's abundant wildlife and warm and welcoming people blew me away.

"We needed to make a positive commitment to people in this country," Beks told me. "The foundation is as important as the business... We're passionate about it, and the travel business allows us to pursue that passion."

We visited the Vukani project, where beautiful beads are made from recycled magazines (*inset above*), and the Thandanani project, creating colourful robes and clothes from traditional fabrics – both empowering women,

proud to be earning their own income.

At Mambanje Primary School, which ABCF supports, we watched children, bursting with energy, singing and dancing to marimbas. In myriad school projects, operators such as ABC, Imvelo Safaris, Hideaways Africa and Wilderness – through their non-profit Children in the Wilderness (CITW) – improve and build infrastructure and provide learning materials, scholarships and school meals. At Ngamo School, Mxolisi Sibanda, CITW's Communities Engagement Manager, once

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CITW's latest initiative, the pioneering Wilderness Ngamo Livestock Farm and Vocational Centre, opens in February. The project was co-funded by the Federal Republic of Germany through KfW and the SADC TFCA Financing Facility, which is being managed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and local stakeholders.

This ambitious farming scheme, complete with abattoir, will provide skills training and education for 40 students (20 male and 20 female) to sustainably breed cattle and cultivate vegetables, and will also offer free workshops for communities. The meat and veg produced will supply staff rations to Wilderness and other camps.

"The initiative will serve as both a working cattle farm and an accredited training centre for students," Sue Goatley, Wilderness Zambezi Impact Manager, said. "And it embodies our commitment to fostering positive change and



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empowerment within communities."

Since 2010, Imvelo Safaris' positive impact contribution to communities and conservation is estimated at some US\$6,250,000. It includes their annual 'Smile-and-See' safari, when they facilitate international dentists and optometrists, setting up outreach clinics in five villages. To date, 49,300 patients have been treated.

Imvelo's pioneering Community Rhino Conservation Initiative (CRCI), which brought locally extinct rhinos back to Hwange in 2023, was the dreamchild of MD Mark Butcher. I'd joined the team translocating the first two white rhinos through the night from Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve and felt the electrifying buzz of excitement from hundreds of people welcoming the new arrivals.

Farmers had given up cattle-grazing pastures bordering the park to form the

rhinos' Ngamo Sanctuary. In return, 40 Cobra Community Wildlife Protection scouts have been employed from local villages. And gate fees from its 2000 international visitors thus far help fund the Ngamo Health Clinic, benefitting thousands. Its success led to a second sanctuary with a further two rhinos in September, and a third is underway. More are intended, aiming eventually for one heavily protected conservancy of 30-50 rhinos. Butch, meanwhile, has bigger dreams.

"Kavango Zambezi has 232,000 elephants but fewer than 100 rhino. Imagine all the tourists going to [Kavango Zambezi's] parks also paying gate fees to see rhinos in these CRCI-style sanctuaries," he said enthusiastically. "Our model could greatly increase rhino numbers and further engage communities in conservation and tourism benefits."

It's this beautiful synergy of communities, conservation and tourism – and the energy and positivity behind it – that makes Hwange and its people so special. 🐘



AFRICAN BUSH CAMPS FOUNDATION (2)



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Above, clockwise from top left: Flow-down benefits. Children tend the vegetable garden at Mambanje School; the first two white rhinos in the Community Rhino Conservation Initiative (Mlevu and Azenze); a volunteer optometrist testing villagers' sight as part of Imvelo's 'Smile-and-See' programme; African Bush Camps' guests visit the Thandanani sewing project

This pic: Rewarding visits. Hwange is one of southern Africa's leading wildlife reserves, particularly known for its large elephant herds, seen by the sleep-out platform at Wilderness' Linkwasha camp



Other Hwange initiatives:

LONG SHIELD LION GUARDIANS

This grassroots project simultaneously saves predators and protects livestock. They help farmers build stronger kraals for cattle, chase lions away armed only with *vuvuzelas*, and alert herders on WhatsApp when they detect collared lions.

PAINTED DOG CONSERVATION

Humans are the biggest threat to painted dogs (wild dogs), hence PDC raises awareness in communities through education, hosting some 1000 children in their bush camp annually. They monitor the packs in the area and rescue injured animals.

FRIENDS OF HWANGE

In the dry season, artificial waterholes are the lifeblood of the park. FoH works with ZimParks on drilling and maintaining boreholes and pumps, clearing firebreaks, rescuing injured animals and conducting the annual animal count across the park.

CONSERVATION AND WILDLIFE FUND

Founded by safari operators and conservationists, this non-profit trust conducts anti-poaching patrols in areas surrounding Hwange and supports human-wildlife coexistence.

